



Let's Make Tracks for High Speed Rail

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After 12 years of talk, studies, lawsuit threats and postponements, California voters may finally weigh in on high-speed rail. So far, California has spent twice the amount of time jawboning than it took the Japanese to build the first line of their vaunted Shinkansen bullet train network. It's time for California to get up to speed.

The California High Speed Rail Authority was thought of as a joke in 1996. The idea that a state mired in financial problems, populated by convenience-addicted devotees of an ingrained car culture, could pull off a project of this scale was considered the biggest fantasy since former Gov. Jerry Brown suggested the state launch its own space program. Besides, in 1996, gas averaged \$1.37. Fewer people are laughing now.

A \$9.95 billion bond measure has been placed on November's statewide ballot as Prop. 1. It would provide the initial funds for a high-speed San Francisco to Los Angeles rail link. The other \$30 billion to complete the system, which would reach San Diego and Sacramento in later phases, would presumably come from federal sources and private industry.

While we have some serious reservations about the proposal, there is no question that a viable high-speed rail network should be constructed in California, post-haste. For those balking at the price tag, think of the costs of airport expansion and additional runways. Consider that Oakland Airport just spent \$300 million upgrading terminals, and a plan just to reconfigure — not even add — a new runway at San Francisco International was predicted as costing \$1.5 billion. And that was nine years ago. Consider the cost of widening several hundred miles of freeway or even adding flyovers and capacity expansions at chokepoints.

An electric high-speed train would complete the trip between San Francisco and Los

Angeles in about two and a half hours, backers say. The 45-minute flight, with all the waiting around, might actually prove slower, depending on one's point of origin and ultimate destination. In Japan, the trains are so prompt people can literally set their watches by their arrival. The trains also depart every 15 or 20 minutes.

The Japanese approved building their system in 1958, just as the Bay Area dismantled Francis "Borax" Smith's Key System empire because, after all, the era of rail travel in California was over. When the first Shinkansen line began operating, linking Tokyo with Osaka, a distance of 343 miles, the six-hour, 40 minute journey was cut the three hours, ten minutes.

Funny things have happened in California recently. Prop. 116, approved in 1987, helped create three state-subsidized lines. The number of tickets sold on these routes rose to 4.9 million in the 2006-2007 fiscal year. In May alone, as gasoline stood at \$4.50 a gallon, 157,000 seats on the Capitol Corridor linking San Jose with Sacramento via Oakland were sold, up 11 percent from a year earlier. The San Joaquins, linking Oakland and Bakersfield with bus connections to Los Angeles, had ticket sales jump 21 percent in May over the previous year to 92,000, according to Caltrans.

Sure there are things to watch for. Remember when officials promised a new Bay Bridge for \$900 million? Recent estimates say it will cost \$6.3 billion. Could more people potentially benefit by spending \$9.95 billion on improvements serving daily commuters rather than competing for long-haul travelers with the airlines? Perhaps, but building a high-speed network doesn't preclude improving urban mass transit. It is time to get California back on track.